

Development or Justice? The (De-)Construction of a Political Conflict around a Hydroelectric Powerplant in San Pablo de Amalí, Ecuador

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Paper delivered on LASA Congress, 5-8 May 2022



source :

Abstract

My paper focuses on the construction of a supposable trade-off between development – as the dream of material prosperity and economic progress – versus the preservation of an intact environment. According to common development discourse, natural resources are intrinsically finite, and any society is forced to choose between a developed living standard or an intact environment. Political ecologists reframe and partly reject this dilemma because environmental conflict is often not about (the lack of) natural resources per se, but starts already with the definition of the sense, use, and materiality of the parts of nature that later are seen as the ‘natural resources’ at stake.

I argue based on my case study of a hydroelectric powerplant in rural Ecuador that for locally affected communities living within contexts of infrastructural exclusion, environmental conflicts may not be about the environment as a scarce resource; they often are not even about the collective decision-making of how to manage the environment. They convert into the choice between allowing private and statal companies to exploit the natural resources around them with the hope that they would provide basic infrastructure in change (e.g., the mainstream understanding of development); or claiming sovereignty over their resources, environment, and livelihood, and keep on hoping for other statal actors to fulfil their infrastructural duties without exploiting the environment (e.g., what is called environmental justice in political ecology). Like this, private and statal actors in development projects not only base their power on imagined better futures, but above all on the vulnerability of local communities in real need for infrastructure to achieve decent livelihoods in remote areas.

Introduction

On the front picture of this paper, a construction can be seen whose purpose the uninitiated spectator may not discern. It is the mini dam that forms part of the hydroelectric powerplant called ‘San José del Tambo’, located in the Dulcepamba River, central Ecuador, right where the Andean highlands merge with the coastal plains. The company Hidrotambo S.A. who owns the powerplant engage with a globalized discourse of green energy production and present their project as part of the solution to fight climate change. They are backed up by local, regional, and national authorities. The project even formed part of the Clean Development Mechanism managed by the United Nations.

Nevertheless, the dam’s unobtrusive appearance and the belittling discourse around it stands in sharp contrast to the avalanche of (mostly negative) consequences that its planification, construction, and operation brought for the people living around the river. Not only ignored the company the social, political, and legal characteristics of the riverbed and its dwellers, privatized its waters with the help of the state, and violently imposed the construction of the powerplant against fierce protest of the local community. Even more severe, the bad premonitions of the local protesters all became true: first, because of the lack of a constant water flow in the river, the fish population – formerly an important part of the local community’s diet – declined significantly. And second, already during the first heavier rainfalls in 2015, right after the diversion of the river was completed, the water masses destroyed the mini dam and flooded the village of San Pablo de Amalí located right in front of the powerplant, taking three lives, 15 houses, and uncountable hectares of crops and fruit plantations.

In other words: despite of its presentation as a showcase project, the construction of the hydroelectrical powerplant in the Dulcepamba River worsened the living conditions of the villages around the river in many ways, as all my informants agree.

It was this highly contradictive setting that intrigued me. For one month, I worked in the area as a participant observer in close collaboration with the Dulcepamba River Project, an NGO consisting of local activists and volunteers from the U.S. that coordinates academic and legal protests and actions against the water grab in the Dulcepamba River until today. I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with current and former villagers of San Pablo and with people living in other villages upstream, I spoke to regional authorities, and I conducted three focus group discussions. Through two-stage coding of my data, I want to answer the question guiding this paper: How is the environmental conflict in the Dulcepamba River valley constructed?

There is a rich and versatile academic debate around environmental conflicts. Particularly within political ecology (Le Billon, 2015), it is one of the prime foci of current research and debate (Le Billon & Duffy, 2018). Therefore, my theoretical basis stems from this field of interest, engaging with the contradicting meanings of development, and with the importance of environmental justice understood as “the right to remain in one’s place” (Anguelovski 2015, p. 61). The hopes and constrains around development and environmental justice manifest themselves – as I show in my analysis – in the local (lack of) infrastructure. Therefore, I equally address the academic debate around the importance of local infrastructure, and the elusive hopes and urgent needs these structures become.

By bringing together these theoretical bases and through the analysis of my data, I want to show that the core issue of this environmental conflict is not the environment as a scarce resource, as often supposed in the mainstream development discourse; it is not even the collective decision-making process around a natural resource that led to a conflict, as political ecologist might think; it is a political, merely discursive connection between the exploitation of natural resources and the possibility of a decent livelihood in the area that forces the local community to decide between development or justice.

In what follows, I will first describe the history of this conflict and its regional and local context. Then, I will set the theoretical basis to give an in-depth analysis of the conflict in the final part of this paper.

The hydroelectric powerplant in the Dulcepamba River Valley¹

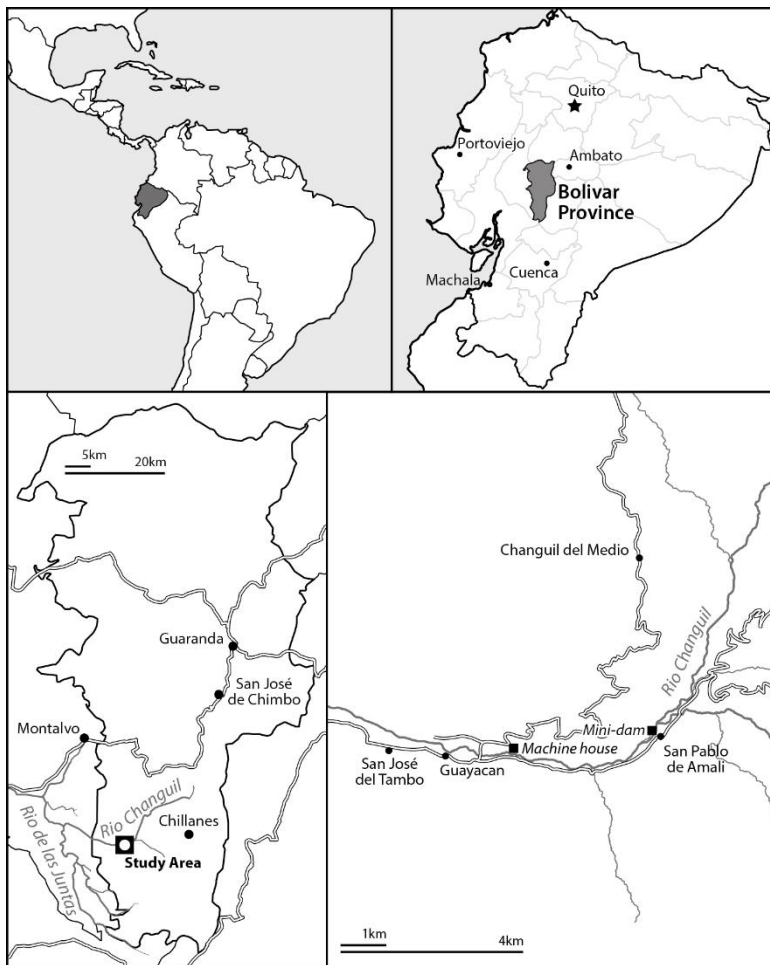


Figure 1: Map of the side drawn by Manuel Kasimir (2021).

The Dulcepamba River Valley, located in the southwest of Ecuador, approximately 50 kilometres away from Guayaquil, represents a space in between the Andean highlands and the subtropical foothill region which extends to the coastal plains. The valley is steep: on the ride from the province capital of Chillanes to San Pablo, one experiences a close to 2000-meter altitude drop and a fundamental change in climatic conditions in just one and a half hours. There are close to 140 villages spread throughout the whole valley (Moran, 2019) with a total of approximately 14,000 inhabitants.²

The region has the nickname ‘granary of Ecuador’, because the ideal climatic conditions allow for a large agricultural variety. Because of the lack of flat territory, there is no big scale, homogenous, plantation-like agricultural production as there is in coastal areas. The most important activity of the local population is small-scale agriculture, for subsistence and for sale in local and regional markets. Cash-crops can be found to a smaller extent, especially cacao is grown mainly for international export. Despite these favourable agricultural conditions, Bolivar Province is one of the poorest areas in the country (Ministerio Coordinador de Desarrollo Social, 2017). This fact manifests itself in insufficient or even inexistent public infrastructure in the region, a problem that will be discussed with more detail below.

¹ The information in this chapter stems in most parts from my fieldwork, personal conversations hold between the 01-23-2020 and the 02-15-2020 in Chillanes and San Pablo and some official documents provided by the Dulcepamba River Project.

² According to census sectors within the Dulcepamba watershed geographic area in the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC), 2010 Housing and Population Census.

Small holdings were not always the predominant land ownership pattern in the region. San Pablo provides a good example for this development: the village was one big hacienda until the middle of the 20th century when debates around land reform took place in the whole country and led to the formal end of the hacienda and plantation complexes in the 1960s (Goodwin, 2017). It was after these reforms that families from the indigenous dominated highlands migrated down to San Pablo.

Even though the land tenure pattern changed, the hacienda period left the village with a legacy of ownership mentality over every piece of land. The villagers therefore do not have any commonly used ground, and all the agriculturally productive parts of the village are divided into small territories. Thus, most people in the village own several pieces of land spread across a range of 20 kilometres. Even the small part of commonly used land where the church, the school and the football field are built upon had to be bought in a complicated process from the former Hacienda owner.

Surprisingly, the ownership mentality of land has not been engrained around the use of water in the region. The river was used by the villagers as a common pool resource for subsistence fisheries, sanitary needs, and leisure. There were rules about how to fish, e.g., with different techniques depending on the season and without poison to maintain a healthy fish population. But, at least according to my informants' memories, there was always an abundance of water and fish and therefore no need to formalize these unofficial rules of usage.

On an official level, all water resources in Ecuador are owned by the state, which in turn grants use permits to individuals at their request. This regulation is a consequence of Ecuador's highly progressive national constitution that explicitly forbids the privatisation of water. But until recently an overwhelming majority of the farmers in the Dulcepamba River valley did not register their water uses because they did not deem it necessary.

Therefore, thousands of watershed residents did not have water use permits in the years 2003 and 2004, when CONELEC (National Ministry of Electricity) granted environmental licenses and operating permits for the Dulcepamba River to Hidrotambo. These permits included more water than the watershed drained during 69% of the year (Newmiller, Walker, Fleenor, & Pinter, 2017). At around the same time, SENAGUA (National Secretariat for Water) as another state entity provided water use permits for the same river to the dam's original promotor, a company named *Corporación para la Investigación Energética* (CIE). Soon after in 2005, the water title was transferred to Hidrotambo.

The operating permits granted by the Ministry of Electricity to Hidrotambo only allowed the production of energy for personal use, e.g., to operate factories owned by the same investors as Hidrotambo. Later Hidrotambo would change its permits to be able to produce electricity in the Dulcepamba River and sell it to the national grid as part of the national strategy to export its renewable energy production (Redacción la Fuente, 2019).

The majority investors of Hidrotambo S.A. are a group of companies that belong to the Cuesta family. They are well-known in Ecuador, since they have made a fortune from a national monopoly production of rubber boots, as well as through many other economic activities.³ Hidrotambo had by the time also gathered some international investors from Spain and Canada.

The planification process had some major incongruencies. Most significantly, the state entities granted the water concessions without respecting the hierarchy of water users established in the law described above. To bypass national regulations concerning water use, the company literally rendered the people living in the Dulcepamba River invisible with the grotesque lie that there is 'nobody living in the area,' as several villagers and the Dulcepamba River Project members confirm. Additionally, even though the company conducted an impact assessment, it was rudimentary and lacked scientific seriousness. The process of free, prior, and

³ "José Cuesta, un legado de trabajo y solidaridad". La Hora. <https://lahora.com.ec/noticia/1102126001/jose-cuesta-un-legado-de-trabajo-y-solidaridad>. Last visit: 06-27-2021.

informed consent – mandatory as well for a project of such magnitude – was almost inexistant in the village. Only one villager remembers two information sessions that proceeded the implementation of the project, but they took place in El Tambo, a bigger town located some kilometres further downstream, and not in San Pablo itself.

Therefore, my local informants learned about the construction plans approximately one year later, when workers from Hidrotambo's subcontractor for construction, COANDES, already invaded private property belonging to community members in order to begin topographic studies. When the former president of the village and now member of the Dulcepamba River Project heard about the hydroelectric powerplant, he decided to call for a meeting with three other villagers. They were all upset about the rude behaviour of the workers from COANDES and decided to confront them the next day. Spreading the word, they mobilized 22 other community members. Confronted with protest, the workers called the police to counter this community mobilization.

The subsequent confrontations between the police and the protesters quickly escalated as the villagers kept on mobilizing people from the whole region. During the most intense times of protest, up to 4000 people from all the villages in the Dulcepamba River valley came to San Pablo to protest. The company did not just call the police, but the military forces as well. Within months, San Pablo was converted to a 'war zone' as several community members call it, with daily confrontations between the villagers and military forces, abundant use of tear gas and rubber bullets, and detentions of protesters. Some even remember the use of live ammunition by the military and the police.

The state and the company framed the protests as political offenses against the state and accused several protesters of sabotage and violence. Since the protesters already had a considerable network in the country that included politicians and NGOs advocating for human rights, they went to the Constitutional Assembly in 2008, where they could convince enough parliamentarians to grant them amnesty.

In 2009, the course of events took an unexpected turn: the Army Corps of Engineers involved in construction detected that Hidrotambo did not have all the necessary permits to continue with construction. They therefore cancelled the contract and backed out of the project, as well as the international investors. The villagers thought that with the retreat of these actors the whole project had come to an end.

They rejoiced all too soon: in 2012, Hidrotambo signed a new operation permit with CONELEC, and in 2013, the workers started construction again. This time, to avoid protest, they did not approach the river crossing San Pablo but came from the other side through a village called Vainillas. The villagers of Vainillas did not protest, since they considered the project to be a benefit, and they did not fear flooding related to the dam because Vainillas is not located directly next to the river in the flatter part of the valley, but higher up in the mountains.

Hidrotambo's reactivation again spurred protests in San Pablo. In the aftermath of these protests, two protesters were accused once again by the company and the police, this time of organized terrorism. They suffered through judicial processes for years. Here again, their network within national NGOs was of great help for defence and the case moved up to the regional court, where they were acquitted in 2016. While many villagers in San Pablo kept on protesting despite these lawsuits, some did not because they were tired and felt paralyzed due to the legal arbitrariness related to their protest.

In this period, Hidrotambo carried out a major river diversion towards San Pablo, and parts of the village began to erode into the diverted river. Additionally, the quantity of free-floating water declined so much that it affected the fish population. Several villagers even remember tons of fish rotting on the river shores the days after the river diversion.

In October of 2014, the construction was mostly finished, but power production still did not begin. Some villagers presented a demand for protective action in the local court. They feared

the loss of their houses and territories because of possible floods due to the river diversion. The judge called them lunatics and rejected their claims altogether.

But all too soon, the villagers tragically were proven right: only five months after finishing construction of the powerplant, during the first rainy season on 19 March 2015, the river eroded, undermined, and flooded San Pablo. The results were three lost lives, the destruction of 14 houses, major damages to the only road accessing the village, and loss of uncountable crop plantations (Benavides Llerena, 2019).

Despite all the formal inconsistencies, despite the heated conflict, even despite the disastrous flood, the hydroelectric powerplant remains until today.

However, the possibilities for operation of the powerplant are significantly limited since October of 2019 due to a claim placed by 450 villagers from the Dulcepamba watershed communities against the state because of the exorbitant water concession granted to the company. SENAGUA accepted the claim, and, as a consequence, the Water Secretariat ordered Hidrotambo to reconstruct parts of the powerplant and restricted the operation period to the months with the highest amounts of water, namely January to June, since there is not enough water during the rest of the year.

However, Hidrotambo has ignored the water authority's binding resolution: they dried out three kilometres of the river repeatedly every dry season, they have not carried out the required redesign, and they use all of the water in the river for their project during dry season months when they have no water use permit authorized.

Hidrotambo's self-presentation on the internet and within public events starkly contrasts the experiences of local people protesting resistance against the powerplant. Meanwhile the representatives of the company do not cooperate or even take notice of the affected community in San Pablo, in other parts of the valley, above all in the bigger town of El Tambo, they pursue a good-neighbour policy. The activities within this policy consist in the distribution of little gifts at regional festivities, workshops to plant trees or to manufacture Christmas decoration, and guided visits to the powerplant. All these activities are vividly documented on the company's Facebook page.⁴

On a national and international level, Hidrotambo fully engages with the discourse around sustainable development and the gospel of eco-efficiency. Their motto is: "clean energy for everyone" and they claim to generate clean energy, progress, labour opportunities, and environmental consciousness in the area.⁵

But most astonishingly, the powerplant qualified as a project matching the requirements of the Clean Development Mechanism of the UN⁶ between 2008 and 2015, because it "provide[s] emission reductions that are additional to what would otherwise have occurred" (United Nations, 2021). Considering the events in the Dulcepamba River valley – the flood and the grab, the violence and the repression – this qualification seems like a bad joke.

The dilemma between development and environmental justice

The meanings, measures, activities, positions, and hopes of the actors in San Pablo are clustered around a conflict and its core question: Does the local community want the arrival and operation of the hydroelectric powerplant? And, if yes, under which conditions? In other words: Should the community seek progress by letting the company in that brings with better infrastructure and labour opportunities – or at least promises to do so? Or should the people living around the river insist in their constitutional rights be protected, fight for water justice, and therefore, reject the company for not respecting these rights?

⁴ "Hidrotambo S.A.". Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/hidrotambo.sa>. Last visit: 06-29-2021.

⁵ "Hidrotambo S.A.". Hidrotambo website. <https://hidrotambo.com.ec/>. Last visit: 06-27-2021.

⁶ "Project 1298: San José del Tambo Hydroelectric Project". Clean Development Mechanism. <https://cdm.unfccc.int/Projects/DB/TUEV-SUED1187627873.55/view>. Last visit: 06-27-2021.

These arguments move within the well-known, “complex and highly contested nexus between the goals and promises of development, and the frustrating rise of environmental problems and tensions” (Ioris, 2021, p. 3), a nexus discussed in literature since the first critical voices against development (Escobar, 1995) arrived on the scene. According to Pascale Combes Motel et al. (2014, p. 479 ff.), this nexus was called a dilemma or even a trade-off by the UN in the 1970s, depicting it as following:

on the one hand, developing countries aim at achieving higher standards of living; on the other hand, this development process is based on agricultural and industrial expansion, which is usually resource-consuming and environmentally damaging. Thus, protecting the environment and achieving development was considered irreconcilable.

Defined like this, the nexus implies an inevitable conflict. This conflict may or may not lead to violent outbreaks – in any case, it will be there. The definition additionally implies that the nexus between development and environment is a direct link due to resources that are intrinsically finite. Therefore, you can have either one or the other: a developed living standard or an intact environment.

This material and positivist notion of the development-environment nexus was dominated by a discourse from the Global North, intimately linked to capitalism. It represented the hegemonic perspective of governments, NGOs, and private actors during large parts of the 20th century and surely persists, in part, until today.

As one side of this trade-off, the term ‘development’ experienced a stellar career after World War II as part of the Truman Doctrine to extend the “American dream of peace and abundance” (Escobar, 1995, p. 4) all over the planet and especially to the Global South. The plan of the time was nothing less than the restructuring of two thirds of this world (the ‘Second’ and ‘Third World’) so that everyone would reach the goal of material prosperity and economic progress (Escobar, 1995). Until the 1970s, development became an omnipresent concept within governments and NGOs of all idealistic stances, and the need for development became, according to Arturo Escobar (1995), an unquestionable certainty in the social imaginary.

What remains until today is that development denominates one particular way to organize the relation between nature and society, namely by foreseeing the mobilization and exploitation of nature to augment human well-being (Romero & Sasso, 2014). In other words: nature – in form of natural resources – serves human wellbeing. Maybe the most important change is that since the 1990s the emphasis lies on human development, at least for the United Nations Development Programme, “which is about expanding the richness of human life, rather than simply the richness of the economy in which human beings live. It is an approach that is focused on creating fair opportunities and choices for all people” (HDRO, 2015). Despite this change, development as a social endeavour to alleviate the fate of the poor in this world is still without alternative in a modernist perspective (De Vries, 2007). In order to overcome poverty and promote wellbeing, we must develop.

The new focus towards sustainability within the same frame of development encounters similar critiques. What Martinez-Alier (2002, p. 5) ironically calls the ‘gospel of eco-efficiency’ – the kind of environmentalist stance equipped with unbreakable, almost religious faith in “‘sustainable development’, in ‘ecological modernization’, in the ‘wise use’ of resources” (Martinez-Alier, 2002, p. 5) – points exactly at the idea that within this new development discourse ‘sustainable’ is added to development to emphasise that the environmental damages of economic growth would be compensated, at least discursively. So, even though nature as a resource is now taken into account, the system itself based on the growth paradigm does not experience any change.

It comes as no surprise that such a simplistic conception of human relations to their environment would encounter fierce critique within the literature of political ecology (Escobar,

1995; Paulson, 2015). Most prominently, the term is seen as an excuse in which the name of the progress of capitalism is accelerated through the expansion of the commercially productive land and the grabbing of common pool resources. As Antonio Ioris (2021, p. 4) rightly states,

environment-development dilemmas are actually much broader and more complicated than suggested by simplistic narratives of progress and conservation. All major challenges around the world are directly associated with controversial processes of environmental change and landscape degradation.

According to the author, the difficulty of changing our perspective on this nexus arises because it implies a fundamental critique of the capitalist way of life altogether, so expanded and internalised in modern society and asking the question: is human wellbeing tied to material welfare? And if yes, up to which extent?

Through the ongoing failures of development, the need for fundamental change became apparent and some relevant alternative ideas or transition discourses (Escobar, 2015a) emerged, especially during the last 20 years. In the Latin American context, post-development is the most prominent new approach. It aims first to open up a discursive space to describe the condition of the Global South more adequately, rather than as 'underdeveloped'; second, to identify alternatives and, third, to change the relations of power and knowledge that were instilled through the development discourse in the first place (Escobar, 2015a). This alternative thinking, even though it seems quite blurry, now has concrete social, legal, and political influence in several Latin American countries: through the implementation of the rights of nature and the indigenous concept of *Buen Vivir*, it became inscribed in several constitutions of the continent, including in the Ecuadorian one.

The critiques about concepts of development are indeed so manifold and fundamental that, according to Pieter De Vries (2007, p. 26), "critiquing the development industry seems to have become an industry in itself." He is convinced that despite these alternative ideas the desire for development of the people living in remote areas in the Global South should be taken seriously. And even though Escobar himself is one of the most prominent critics of the idea of development, he knows about the ambiguity of the term for the affected population. He states: "For many common people the world over, finally, development has become either a reflection of their aspirations to a dignified life, or an utterly destructive process with which they have to coexist, and not infrequently both at the same time" (Escobar, 2015b, p. 57). Therefore, it is no surprise that the term may see a reinterpretation, but still forms an important part of politics of the 21st century, in Ecuador and beyond.

The other side of this nexus, trade-off, or dilemma in these discussions is mostly called 'nature' or 'the environment', which is somehow misleading, since we as human beings undoubtedly form part of the environment, too. I therefore will call the other side 'justice', since the problems that arise due to the development paradigm often are part of what is fought against in the environmental justice movements all over the planet. More precisely, Isabelle Anguelovski (2015, p. 61) defines environmental justice as the "right to remain in one's place and environment and be protected from uncontrolled investment and growth, pollution, land grabbing, speculation, disinvestment, and decay and abandonment." With this definition, she directly links the idea of environmental justice to the most important critiques of the development discourse exposed above.

This link between development critiques and claims for justice is not a coincidence but has its reason in the fact that most development projects entail disadvantages. If a development project, for example, foresees oil extraction to raise national income, the people living around the extraction site will have to live with the augmentation of risks for environmental damages that comes with such industrial activities. The same applies to the side effects of a dam to produce electricity. Flooding of land, for example, leads to relocation, or a decline of the fish population leads to food scarcity. These disadvantages often are disproportionately felt by some

people, groups, or communities, while they can easily be ignored by others. Their distribution, therefore, is unjust and these injustices lead to claims for environmental justice.

This justice of distribution is the most obvious and most widely used form to conceptualize justice. Who gets what share of environmental impacts? This is according to Schlosberg (2007) an important starting point, but to understand the underlying reasons for these unjust distribution patterns, he emphasises the need of justice as recognition as a second concept: distribution patterns are neither static nor random outcomes, but are shaped by social structures, cultural beliefs, and institutional contexts, in other words by patterns of recognition.

In this sense, the mainstream development discourse as well takes for granted that the reason for conflicts around the development-justice dilemma is the (intrinsically insufficient) environment. Philippe Le Billon (2015, p. 598) states that in political ecology in change, scarcity of environmental goods is not seen as the only or not even the main argument why a conflict arises. Rather, the other aspects of collective decision making are deemed to be decisive. Within this collective decision making, the rights of different groups, their possibility of representation and similar aspects of uneven power relations become apparent and lead to distribution patterns perceived as unfair. These aspects create tense situations that within political ecology already are understood as conflicts, even if they may not lead to a violent outbreak (Le Billon, 2015).

Local Infrastructure between Development and Justice

So, there is a global dilemma about development and the production of environmental hazards, and there are internationally pronounced goals and claims within the environmental justice movements. But these problems are not only created, debated, and combatted on the globalized scale. Indeed, only the smallest part of this debate takes place on this scale. The most important share of the struggle is local, within communities longing for environmental goods or fighting against environmental degradation.

De Vries (2007, p. 25) observes:

It must be a strange experience for students of development, well versed in the latest discussions about 'post'- or 'alternative' development, to be confronted with the thoughts of Andean villagers in the Peruvian highlands. There, when engaging people in discussions about the meanings and costs of development, the position of Andean villagers is quite clear: what is needed is big and small infrastructure, highways and feeder roads, irrigation systems, dams, schools, town-halls, etc.

So, what the author noticed is that the theoretical debate and the local and materialized ideas around development talk at cross-purposes. While post-development is about the disentanglement of wellbeing and material prosperity, what villagers in rural areas need and long for is just that: material infrastructure, be it small or big. It is what they denominate development (or often also 'progress').

To dig deeper in this supposed contradiction of the globalized discourse and the local ideas, it is necessary to think about infrastructure. The term infrastructure is a materiality and a political and analytical category at the same time, making a concrete definition very difficult. The term itself has two parts: first *infra*, Latin prefix for beneath, below or within; and structure, e.g., a plurality of integrated single parts (Carse, 2017, p. 27). So, infrastructures are material constructions that serve some underlying purpose or higher-order project. For the moment, the definition of Penny Harvey et al. (2017, p. 5) suffices: "Infrastructures are extended material assemblages that generate effects and structure social relations, either through engineered (i.e. planned and purposefully crafted) or non-engineered (i.e. unplanned and emergent) activities."

These materials – invisible in other contexts – constantly reach the surface of social conflict in rural areas of Latin America, just as De Vries (2007) observed. Penny Harvey and Hannah

Knox (2012, p. 523) show in a similar vein how roads as the most emblematic incorporation of infrastructure have the capacity to enchant remote communities in the Peruvian Amazon with promises about speed and connectivity, political freedom, and economic prosperity. These promises make roads – and infrastructure in general – a decisive part of the Peruvian imaginary: regardless of class, ethnicity, or gender, everybody wants roads and sees them as a necessary social good. However, the promises that roads come with almost never get fulfilled since the roads, if ever built in the first place, mostly disintegrate again due to the difficult environmental conditions in the area.

While Harvey and Knox (2012) talk about infrastructure that evoke elusive, somehow irrational hopes within local populations, they also refer to the tyranny of delay that comes with the constant lack of access in remote areas. Nevertheless, these references seem to come with an ironic undercurrent, stressing the naivety of the wish for access so frequent around the local population. It is in this context that De Vries (2007) claims to take seriously the wishes of the people actually living in these areas. He states that these wishes for progress are no naïve ideas resulting from a lack of information about possible dangers and obstacles; they are the result of conscious decisions to hold politicians, state authorities, and private companies accountable for their promises. Therefore, he claims that local communities should not compromise their desire for development.

Dennis Rodgers and Bruce O’Neill (2012) also take infrastructure not as hope and illusion, but as a right for access. Therefore, they denominate the notorious lack of infrastructure in urban areas as infrastructural violence. The violence happens either active, when someone or a group of people is consciously kept out of certain places, facilities, or areas (e.g., parks or means of transport); or passive, as in exclusion because of infrastructure that is not built or built without consideration of all possible users (e.g., the lack of safe crossways for pedestrians). Gertrude Saxinger et al. (submitted) transmit the notion of infrastructural violence to the rural areas of the Russian arctic. The extreme disconnectedness and subsequent vulnerability make local communities dependent on help for infrastructure works, either from the state or the companies extracting oil in the area. Since both actors do not provide what is necessary – or not even what they promise – the community gets stuck in a state of limbo between hope and despair.

This infrastructural violence in rural areas brings in its wake consequences, as Annelies Zoomers et al. (2011, p. 493) state: “marginal places, of no interest to the private sector and left by NGOs, have increasingly become isolated, sometimes resulting in a landscape of dying places from where people have developed multi-local livelihoods by expanding their networks in the direction of towns or remote destinations.” In other words: people will leave if access is not provided, especially if at the same time other ways of traditional livelihood are increasingly under pressure due to industrial activity. This material lack of infrastructure and simultaneous exploitation of landscapes stemming from a lack of recognition that leads to exclusion directly connects with the aspects of environmental justice discussed above.

In sum: infrastructure is not only about development, but about justice as well. It materializes both sides of the supposed dilemma.

These manifold ways that infrastructure intervenes in daily life indicate that the concept has not only a material, but also a semantic and symbolic value: “Environmental infrastructures turned out to be about the making and remaking of worlds at once material and semiotic and inhabited not only by people but also by a multiplicity of nonhumans,” is the conclusion of Harvey et al. (2017, p. 2). Infrastructure is the materiality that especially remote communities depend on and what their struggles, aims and hopes are about. Also, in the village of San Pablo, as we will see in the following.

The Development vs. Justice Dilemma in the Dulcepamba River valley

When I arrived at San Pablo in January 2020, Hidrotambo was diverting the river again: to protect their machine house located approximately three kilometres downstream of the centre

of San Pablo, workers were moving stones and sand towards the machine house, sending the river closer to the road and houses of San Pablo, augmenting the risk of flooding for the zone. Therefore, the villagers that saw their houses and fields most urgently put at risk alerted the Dulcepamba River Project to interfere against this new episode of physical ‘fait accompli’. They coordinated a visit by the regional people’s defender and other regional authorities. The aim was to document the events officially and to increase pressure on the company and the state entities in charge to adhere to national law. Even not intended, Hidrotambo learned about the visit, too.

At the day of the visit not only the NGO members, company representatives, and the regional authorities were present: the Dulcepamba River Project and the Hidrotambo company both mobilized people to show the regional authorities that they count with support within the local community. Supporters of Hidrotambo showed up in considerable numbers, but remarkably few of them stemmed from San Pablo de Amalí. A bigger share came by taxi from several villages and towns downstream of the river. They brought with banners stating their opinions. Meanwhile one expressed the aversion against the foreign members of the Dulcepamba River Project stating ‘fuera gringa mentirosas’ (go away lying gringas’), the other manifested that ‘San Pablo de Amalí wants progress’. It was not the first time I heard this claim, and therefore this banner called my attention. I wondered: what is progress⁷ about in San Pablo?

To explain the importance of progress as the wishes of what *should* be there, I must start with what is *not* there, with the analysis of what is missing and why.

A vast majority of people in San Pablo, in the Dulcepamba River valley and even in the Bolívar province would agree that what is most needed in the region is infrastructure. Indeed, the claim for infrastructure is the most common one in reunions and meetings, and as I learned after the day of the visit, the company representatives asked people from other villages to join the reunion and take the opportunity to demand improvements of local infrastructure from regional authorities, even though this was not the purpose of the visit.

While spending time in the area the eagerness to place such claims becomes clear, since the lack of infrastructure does not concern luxury goods like warm water or washing machines, but the most basic and fundamental materialities for a decent livelihood in the area. It is important to stress this point: discussions around infrastructure in the zone are very present because the needs are very real.

I indicated above that the infrastructure in the valley was poor or even inexistent. Now, I would like to clarify what this means in more detail. Firstly: even though most homes in the watershed communities are connected to the electricity supply system, some of the newly built houses in San Pablo after the flood of 2015 still were not provided with connection even after five years, because reconstruction is very slow.⁸ Second, even until now, San Pablo does not have a publicly built drainage or stormwater management system, and only 30 percent of households were part of a water supply system (Sardán Muyba, 2015, p. 83 ff., personal conversations). Of course, there was no treatment for drinking water, either. Therefore, every house must build and organize its own water system. Some houses do not have such a system and therefore no toilet, shower or sink at all. Third: there is no public garbage system in the community up until today (Sardán Muyba, 2015, p. 83 ff., personal conversations). Therefore, people burn or bury their household waste or deposit in one of the few public rubbish bins in El Tambo. Finally, to catch network for mobile phones and internet is an issue of pure luck in

⁷I want to remark that ‘progress’ as an idea, a hope, or a faith is at least as elusive and unclear as ‘development’. The term is seen also as its predecessor. And meanwhile development has the additional back-up of expert knowledge, the more politically connotated concept of progress remains underneath the development discourse as “a crude dogma, debasing the sublime and fascinating elaborations of its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers and ideologues” (Sbert, 2010, pp. 214-215). Finally, different actors I met during my fieldwork used both terms interchangeably. Therefore, I allow myself to treat them as synonyms in this analysis.

⁸ Interview with affected villagers, 1/26/2020.

the valley, even though locals have some experience on which corner, stone, or otherwise marked part of the landscape connection is most probable to find.

But probably the most important issue concerning infrastructure in the community is the road crossing the Dulcepamba River valley between Chillanes and El Tambo, just as Harvey and Knox (2012) observed in remote communities in Peru. The first approximately ten kilometres leaving Chillanes are paved, so, this part of the ride is the most safe and comfortable. But then, the pavement stops and leads into a gravel road. This road is uncomfortable the entire year but turns into a major danger during rainy season. After heavy rainfalls, there is no gravel anymore but only mud. While good, expensive off-road cars may be able to cope with these conditions and the very common motorcycles in the area allow the one or two riders to push their vehicle across the worst parts and walk through the mud, it is impossible for the heavy, old public busses to pass the road to San Pablo. During my visit, these conditions occurred twice, so that there were two periods of three days with no public transport in the area.

The dimensions of the road problem become clearer when carefully considering the manifold needs that urges the San Pablo community to go to Chillanes or El Tambo: there is a primary school in the village, but after the age of ten, the kids must go to school in El Tambo. There is no medical attention whatsoever in San Pablo itself and a health centre covering only the very basic needs in El Tambo. Any administrative issue must be dealt with in Chillanes, there is no state authority in San Pablo and only the local administration in El Tambo. The supply of food or normal everyday goods is only rudimentarily covered by the two shops in San Pablo, and anything more than basic alimentation for a dinner, for example, must be bought in El Tambo or Chillanes. When the road was inaccessible due to floods in 2015, 2017 or 2019, food became scarce in the village after seven days, as the villagers told me. Not only the supply, but also the sales of cash crops like bananas must be done in Chillanes since the people in El Tambo grow tropical fruits in major amounts themselves, while the coffee and cacao for exportation is sold in El Tambo.

So, the wish for a paved road to the next bigger town is not a fantasy for speed or a promise for economic prosperity as described by Harvey and Knox (2012); it rather is an essential need to live in the area. Because people are not only confronted with what is described by the authors as “livelihoods and life itself jeopardised by the tyranny of delay” (Harvey & Knox, 2012, p. 524), but with what Rodgers and O’Neill (2012) and Saxinger et al (submitted) more adequately call the infrastructural violence of exclusion.

When it comes to infrastructure, responsibility is a decisive issue. Who would be responsible for what part of this materiality? In other words: Who is not doing her or his job in San Pablo? The construction of a toilet, for example, is not the duty of any local or regional authority but a task on its own for every household. In these cases, it is difficult to know what leads to the relinquishment of such basic infrastructure. But, surely, the absence of a sewage system does not help since this lack impedes the possibility to install a proper toilet in the first place.

On a local level, the people in San Pablo are very well organized to solve infrastructure issues. They are also keen to harness possibilities for obtaining proper infrastructure and get mad at each other if collaboration is not done properly, as I have witnessed on several occasions. Despite high capacity and willingness, it is no easy task to organize a community to plan and build a sewage system and to maintain it after. And, considering the economic condition of most people in the region, it is almost impossible to collectively pay for it. These tasks become even more difficult in a community so divided like San Pablo.

Therefore, state entities would bring the necessary budget, technical know-how and authority to manage infrastructure. It is also their task as inscribed in the national constitution,⁹ and as

⁹ Art. 277, paragraph 4: “To conceive *Buen Vivir*, general duties of the state will be: To produce goods and create and maintain infrastructure and provide public services.”

the aim of the people joining the day of the visit shows, people do not hesitate to hold them accountable for.

However, no state entity constructs infrastructure in the area. As my informants and my own observations confirm, manifestations of the state as a service provider are almost inexistent. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that even regional state representatives themselves consider the lack of infrastructure as the most prominent problem in the area, as a public intervention of the people's defender on the day of the inspection shows: "It hurts me that there are places within my province that are completely forgotten, that are backward" he stated, adding that "I went to San Pablo de Amalí and the road is torn apart. I hope that some authority in the sector will arrive and improve the road".

The reasons why the state is unable to manage infrastructure are manifold, and an in-depth analysis of this problem would exceed the scope of this paper. But it comes as no surprise that in such a situation – with no local infrastructure and no state entity capable or willing to provide it – the local community perceive a rich and powerful private company wanting to work in the area not only as a threat, but also as a possible provider of local infrastructure. Therefore, hope rose immediately when Hidrotambo arrived, and the company did not hesitate to nurture these hopes, as a villager told me in this interview:

They said that they would give to San Pablo a health centre with good doctors that they themselves would bring here. They would give a high school and the paved road from San Pablo to El Tambo.[...] So, [the community]... They got excited about that because these things would be here. So, they accepted that they would construct the project and give [the community] all these things. (Interview 23, 02-11-2020, San Pablo)

So, it is true: the imagination of infrastructure enchanted the people in San Pablo, leading to hopes and fantasies that turned out to be, exactly as Escobar (2015b) says, "a reflection of their aspirations for a dignified life." But not because of what the company would do, but because of the development it would bring as a side effect. The fixation on possible development in the form of infrastructure shows the semantic and symbolic power of infrastructure as an expectation and hope. It explains also the huge and permanent deception that sprawled in the local community when it became clear that no infrastructural benefit would arrive. These expectations are constantly present until today and form part of the narrative of what happened in San Pablo concerning the powerplant.

The following part of the interview I made with a villager and NGO member exemplifies the perception of what progress means for the people in San Pablo:

Hannah: *You said the Hydrotambo company said that they would bring progress and that this never happened. So, I would like to speak about the word 'progress': How do they define progress? How would you define it? What happens in this 'progress'?*

Interviewee: *Progress in quotation marks?*

Hannah: *Yes, it's like a big ball of gold in the horizon...*

Interviewee: *It's like trying to reach the sun but you will never reach.*

Hannah: *Yes, exactly. What is progress? How do they paint progress?*

Interviewee: *[...] The progress... for them was – the progress was for them because they produce and sell the electricity. Therefore, the progress did reach them because they are earning some million dollars. Therefore, economically, there was progress for them. What we [the villagers] were confused about is for whom the progress would it be. We did not understand that progress would come, but for them.*

Hannah: *Mhm.*

Interviewee: For us, there was no progress because they did not have... no study plan, no... nothing of progress for the community. We could call progress if they maybe would make a hospital with all specialities for free for the whole Parroquia of San José del Tambo and that the whole country could be attended here. That I would call progress because you could be attended with the simplest or the most complicated issue for free. I would call this progress. [...]

Hannah: Of course. The issue of the hospital – something that calls my attention is that progress is sometimes put equal like covering basic needs. And that actually, this is not, this is like, “that they get us a hospital, that they get us an asphalted street,” I mean, I don’t know if you know what I mean, but this is actually not going forward, this is just covering what actually should be here.

Interviewee: Yes, of course, yes. But in any case, we don’t have that.

Hannah: Yes, true.

Interviewee: Because there is nothing. Because if you go to the health centre in San José del Tambo, they’ll give you a paracetamol, a diclofenac, they will make some exams to see if you have parasites, but if you have, for example, to get an operation on the gallbladder they cannot do that, they have to transfer you to... Chillanes, Guayaquil, Babahoyo, to other provinces. So, in a way this would be, we could say... it would guarantee us, at least, the *Buen Vivir*.

(Interview 25, 02-12-2020, San Pablo)

In my informant’s opinion, the people in the Dulcepamba River valley do not have the guarantee of *Buen Vivir*, of living a decent life in the zone. He therefore defines *Buen Vivir* as the fulfilment of basic infrastructure. So, he calls *Buen Vivir* what the other villagers name *progreso* and does not understand *Buen Vivir* as an alternative to development.

He and everybody else living in the area are very aware of the fact that the Ecuadorian state will not fulfil these wishes. Therefore, it is only reasonable to demand infrastructure from whoever else that seems able to provide such services. In other words: to demand progress from Hidrotambo is to demand that the company fills the gap left by the local and regional authorities.

If we turn to the other part of the dilemma that I defined as justice – understood as the right to remain in one’s place – it becomes clear that many of the events around the planification, construction and operation of the powerplant are perceived as profoundly unjust by a considerable part of the local community. The exaggerated water concession granted by the state for the company, the loss of fish as an important resource for the locals’ subsistence, and the flood because of the unprofessional construction show the unjust distribution of environmental goods and hazards in the area.

The lack of recognition and respect of the local community form part of the whole process, starting with the almost inexistant free, prior, and informed consent and the incomplete and unprofessionally conducted environmental impact assessment, followed by the exaggerated amount of violence of the local authorities to beat down the protests and lawsuits delegitimizing the local defence of the natural resources at stake. But the most prominent and blatant aspect of this injustice of recognition is the actual denial of the existence of any adjacent communities living in the Dulcepamba River valley in order to bypass national water regulation.

The events around the powerplant are as well a very poignant example of ‘the other side of infrastructure’: infrastructural violence is not only exclusion through its missing, but also through the enforced imposition of unwanted infrastructure that the local community in the end must cope with. Infrastructure is construction, materiality, and a manifestation of power in a very physical way. Hidrotambo had the power – the machines, the people, the arms – to just build the powerplant, diverge the river, and destroy the crops that were in its way. Put in this perspective, local infrastructure expresses environmental injustice in a very physical manner.

But what have these environmental injustices to do with the promises of development made by the company?

Hannah: *What caused the division of the community?*

Mother: *The lack of dialogue. Everything brings its advantages and disadvantages. But the people did not understand, there were rumours as well that [the company] would take away the water in big ice cubes and sell it abroad, and that the environment would be damaged. But this never happened, we must be realist, too. Okay, the river dried out a bit, but not completely. There is less fish, but that happens everywhere. There was no good information in the community, the little people did not understand. [...] [They] divided because of that false information. And, on the other hand, because everybody wanted to get personal benefits, too. They did not fight for the people, but only for their own pockets.*

Son: *The community would have benefited, San Pablo would have had a health centre, a paved road. I love San Pablo, me, my siblings, my cousins, the first thing we do on weekends is go to San Pablo. So, San Pablo would have progressed. But the people did not know how to earn it.*

Mother: *Because one gives something to the other, and the other part gives something, too. It's an interchange. So, the company has to give something. Because it is true as well, the people suffered a lot, the poor little people were bad treated. They were beaten, some went to jail. But the dialogue was always missing.*

Son: *It's like if you come to my house and I shout: "Go away!" we cannot talk, right? But if you say: "Come in! Let's talk," this would be another issue. But the people completely shut themselves off. (Interview 5, 01-26-2020, El Tambo)*

The woman in the interview extract above ascribes the main problem of the conflict around the powerplant in San Pablo to a lack of dialogue. She plays down all the negative impacts of the construction of the powerplant by emphasising their normality in context of climate change and further explains that people acted wrong due to misinformation and personal interests. She then proceeds – backed up by her son – by saying that the people did not know how to get the maximum out of this situation. This maximum would have been progress.

But most importantly for this analysis, she argues that every situation, including the construction of the powerplant, brings advantages and disadvantages, that it is a give and take. She therefore concludes that the acceptance of the hydroelectric powerplant in exchange for infrastructure would have been the only rational behaviour.

The opinions expressed in the interview extract emblematically engage with the trade-off: local infrastructure for natural resource extraction. And this informant is by far not the only one alluding to this frame. At a public hearing in San Pablo during the day of the inspection, several speakers – locals being in favour or against the construction of the powerplant, company representatives, and regional authorities – articulated the same idea. Even the people's defender stated on the day of his visit: "generally, within all the communities where the big companies are, it is said that they bring development." And, most strikingly, the company representative stated that progress should not be negated because of 'two or three people' (asking for justice). During the event, it became evident how strongly the trade-off between development and justice is naturalized within the community.

In sum, when I asked people in the valley what advantages and disadvantages Hidrotambo brought, the answer was: "No advantages, only disadvantages," even from people that place themselves neutral in this conflict. There is an astonishing consensus concerning this issue. They illustrate this perception with the fact that the company did not build a street, a health centre, or a school, as this informant emblematically states:

I tell you, this issue of the – I tell you like this, honestly, with the hydroelectric [powerplant]... We are all adversely affected, not because of the environmental damage, but because we did not know how to benefit when we should have benefited with construction work for the community. That is the only part. (Interview 21, 02-07-2020, El Tambo)

Through these discourses, the community, the regional authorities, and the representatives of the company construct a causality between the infrastructural violence of exclusion in the area; and the claims for environmental justice that led to the rejection of the powerplant.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

To conclude, I come back to the initial question: How is the conflict in the Dulcepamba River valley constructed? It is a political construction around a supposed dilemma: the local community either accepts the exploitation of water for energy production by the Hidrotambo company and gets development from them in the form of basic infrastructure; or they insist in their water rights and reject the company due to its illicit behaviour and renounce on the development it would bring. This dilemma is constructed by the dominant actors – namely the company and the regional authorities – that take the vulnerability of the local community resulting from the infrastructural violence of exclusion as a bargaining asset to impose the reconfiguration of the local natural resources management.

In political ecology, the development-environment dilemma is not discussed as a trade-off without alternatives, but as a construction based on a capitalistic notion of material growth. Nevertheless, this interpretation of the dilemma still suggests that the conflict has the environment as a materiality at its core. What has been ignored is that this dilemma might be a constructed one on a discursive basis, a mere trick to maintain physical control, sovereignty of interpretation, and, finally, the political decision power.

Following Le Billon (2015), I would state, therefore, that this environmental conflict is in fact not about the environment as a scarce resource; it is not even a conflict about the collective decision-making of how to manage the environment; it is a conflict around a politically constructed trade-off of possibilities and constrains for decent livelihoods in remote areas. Of course, this trade-off itself is a social injustice, emerging due to the lack of recognition of the local community; a lack that materializes mainly through the absence of the state as the provider of basic services. This absence leads to an elevated vulnerability that makes the construction of this development-justice dilemma possible in the first place.

What my analysis also brings to light is that even though the dilemma of ‘development’ vs. ‘justice’ is a mere political construction connecting two in principle unrelated issues, it becomes a very crude reality for the local community, a reality not solved by the objection that progress would have never arrived anyways. Even though this is probably true, the expectations, the hopes, and the conflict are indicating otherwise, namely that the lack of development in form of basic infrastructure is a punishment for the impudence of the local community to claim sovereignty over the resources, environment, and livelihood that they consider as theirs.

This leads to a contrasting perception about what is at stake: In the academic debate, progress and development are deemed as ideas from the Global North to accelerate capitalist expansion and the use of nature for material welfare. *Buen Vivir*, in change, is seen as an alternative that fundamentally questions this perception of welfare.

But if government officials or people living in the Dulcepamba River valley talk about progress, development or *Buen Vivir*, they do not necessarily mean materialist welfare or capitalist expansion. The term indeed does not include yet any perception about wellbeing, the relationship to nature, or the commodification of natural resources. It includes as the first and most urgent only the fulfilling of basic infrastructure needed to live a safe and decent life in the

zone. The alternative labelling – call it progress, call it development, call it *Buen Vivir* – does simply not label away the problem that these basic needs are not fulfilled.

In my opinion, it is of crucial importance to recognize that the core of an environmental conflict probably lies outside of the environment as a materiality, because when it comes to collective decision-making around natural resources, the vulnerability of local communities converted into bargaining assets form part of a common strategy to push forward extractivist enterprises. As long as development – understood as the fulfilment of basic needs – is not provided by the state, the dependency of local communities on other powerful actors as potential provider of such infrastructure will severely impede their claims for justice. There is, in other words, almost no way out of the extractivist model under these conditions. Of course, the last ones to blame are the local communities themselves longing for some material goods – like decent roads, a sewage system, or a functioning health centre – that are mostly standard in the more urbanised zones even within their own countries.

Escobar (2015a) states that:

First, it is important to resist falling into the trap, from northern perspectives, of thinking that while the North needs to degrow, the South needs 'development'; conversely, from southern perspectives, it is important to avoid the idea that degrowth is 'ok for the North' but that the South needs rapid growth, whether to catch up with rich countries, satisfy the needs of the poor, or reduce inequalities; while acknowledging the need for real improvements in people's livelihoods, public services, and so forth, it is imperative for groups in the South to avoid endorsing growth as the basis for these improvements; a key criteria is that growth and the economy should be subordinated to BV [Buen Vivir] and the rights of nature, not the other way around. (Emphasis in the original)

In theory, I agree completely with this statement. It is very important that development as an economic fantasy should not get confused with the need for real improvements claimed by local communities. But what to do in the very real and very frequent case where there is no actor willing to provide real improvements without engage with other, often destructive extractivist practices, just as I could witness in the Dulcepamba River valley?

As a final thought, I want to give a first, tentative answer to this question: Concerning the locally affected communities, I would claim, freely paraphrasing De Vries (2007): not only do not compromise your desire for development, but do not compromise your rights for infrastructure, either. And, even more importantly: do not let these two different issues become discursively intertwined. It is very possible and very reasonable to demand both: decent infrastructure and the right to decide over one's own livelihood.

Concerning academy, I would strongly advocate for reconsidering what development is about in zones of conflict between the (neo-)extractive industry and local communities. The very common desire for development does not necessarily mean the desire for some fancy gadgets, but for the very basic needs of infrastructure the state is not able or willing to fulfil.

I do not say that the dilemma constructed by the absence of the state and the discourse of the company is desirable – quite the contrary, it is the destructive mechanism how the extractivist model is brought forward in so many countries of the Global South and the reason why the 'ghost of development' (Quijano, 2000) is still spooking around in Latin America. I equally do not think that this dilemma is inevitable, but that another way of bringing development without losing rights must be found. But I do think that within the discourse around environmental conflict, the core of these conflicts easily gets out of sight and subsequently the political construction of the development-justice dilemma has been ignored. Even though it is devastating to admit the ongoing existence of this dilemma, in my point of view it is the responsibility of scientific research to analyse the shapes of environmental conflicts as they are, and not only to think about how they should be.

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